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Memorial Day, Remembering the Apostates

A whistleblower who cared about soldiers, not war

by [Kelley B. Vlahos](#), May 27, 2013

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Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day

As I was beginning to write this, Washington was unfolding for its annual Memorial Day rituals. Like clockwork, the distant hum of motorcycles would soon herald another [Rolling Thunder](#) convocation. Rows of chairs would suddenly appear at monuments, road closures announced, tiny flags awaiting position at the nation's largest graveyard for its war dead.

Memorial Day is a civic ritual that has become, really, an American religious observation. On this day we celebrate the heroes and the historical canon of our wars. Eyes will water and we will be captured, in awe, of the rolling hills of small white graves, too numerous to take in with one sweep, at Arlington National Cemetery. But dwelling too long on how they got there is not part of the liturgy.

Today's Memorial Day news is competing with [recent scandals](#) from the White House. But some of the worst scandals, we can argue, aren't on the front page, though they are happening all of the time, affecting the survivors of the wars we will sanctify so diligently this weekend. Sadly, it is the very preservation of our war gospels that keep men and

women enlisting in the military and revering it as a religious calling, really, a rite of sacrifice and purity, in the service of the nation. Without that faith, the military would crumble under the weight of its own reality.

One reality is that women are not treated equal in this congregation, in fact, as one story unfolds over another, we realize that [they've been treated quite horrifically](#). No "one-off" scandal, here, but rot from the core that military officials are now pledging to fix.

Another reality bearing down on The Faith is the increasing knowledge that the health of our soldiers and veterans is being sacrificed for the the health of the bureaucracy, or as we like to call it here, the military industrial complex (MIC).

Therefore, government whistleblowers, like Stephen Coughlin, [whom I wrote about recently](#) for *The American Conservative*, are considered apostates, really. He resigned as a chief epidemiologist with the VA after he realized his bosses were manipulating and hiding data about [Gulf War Illness](#) and the toxic exposures that might be making our current vets from Iraq and Afghanistan sick ([see: Burn Pits](#)). Coughlin [recently testified before congress](#) about these misgivings and more.

But after writing about Coughlin, I received an email from a gentleman who could very well be one of the earliest whistleblowers regarding Gulf War Illness and it is he who I would like to talk about, against the backdrop of flags and motorcycles today.

Jim Moss, entomologist

In 1993, Jim Moss was a research entomologist (a zoologist who studies insects) working on a U.S Department of Agriculture contract at the Medical and Veterinary Entomology Research Laboratory in Gainesville [when he made what he believed was a stunning discovery](#). While studying the interactive effects of the insect repellant DEET with various pesticide agents on cockroaches, he found that a type of defoliant (spray that causes plants leaves to fall off), when mixed with DEET, caused a "rapid kill" of the persistent pest. Bad for the ancient cockroach for sure, but the beginning of a potential breakthrough for research into Gulf War Illness, then known simply as "[Gulf War Syndrome](#)."

That's because in the coarse of his research, which was already coming under his supervisors' radar of suspicion, Moss found that the Pyridostigmine Bromide (PB) pills given to Gulf War soldiers to ward off the affects of a nerve gas attack belonged to the same class of compounds as the defoliant. Moss knew that the soldiers during the war had slathered themselves with DEET insect repellent (which was developed by the Army after WWII), as well as sprayed their clothing with [permethrin](#), a common insecticide. Add that to the PB pills they were taking, and it made for a toxic brew that could have something to do with the symptoms the vets were experiencing after the war: chronic fatigue, muscle and joint pain, skin conditions, neurological problems, among other disorders and illnesses.

After he started sharing his initial findings, work got back to his bosses. DEET had been developed in the same lab where Moss was working. It was being used commercially in products like "Off" bug repellent, which was made by S.C Johnson Wax. If word got out that DEET had these toxic properties and that it could in part be responsible for harming troops in the field ... well, the prospects were dire enough for his superiors to tell Moss not to discuss his findings with anyone else outside the lab.



Jim Moss

According to his recollection, Moss was also warned that his reputation and career were at risk.

Moss felt that was a risk he was willing to take. He went before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee with his cockroaches and theories and it turned out to be the most fateful decision he would make.

"They promised I would never work for them again," Moss recalled in a recent interview with Antiwar.com. "In a sense I had nothing left to lose except if I had been wrong."

He was right. His appearance before the senate hearing on military research and the Gulf War on May 6, 1994 cost him his career. To this day, he believes his research and subsequent testimony are why he was unable to get his contract renewed, and why he has since been blackballed throughout the entire USDA grant system. Yet as we know



War Iconography: Rolling Thunder on Memorial Day (Credit: Vlahos)

now from a breadth of evidence [culled from scientific research after 1994](#) – much of which doesn't even cite Moss's early trials – PB pills and pesticides have been directly linked to the chronic, multi-symptom illnesses suffered by some 250,000 out of the 697,000 troops who served in the Gulf War. Today, it appears to be [conventional wisdom](#) in much of the scientific community.

Like many whistleblowers, however, no one with any influence really stood up for Moss, a husband and father of three children – ages 11 and 7 (twins) — at the time. They let him hang – even Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., the chairman of the committee, did little more than query his agency bosses as to whether Moss was mistreated or not. Of course, the agency, according to [this 1997 account](#), had a different view, saying it did not stifle his findings. “In fact we encouraged Dr. Moss to pursue his research,” with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Defense, said Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman at the time, who added that Moss knew from the start that his particular contract had an expiration date and it had nothing to do with his findings or public testimony.

Moss tells Antiwar.com that despite the agency's soft soap, he's been *persona non grata* ever since. “Early on, I couldn't believe that someone didn't step in and say, ‘wait a minute, why are you ruining this guy's career,’” said Moss. “Nobody did. Rockefeller waved his arms a bit but no one else.”

“Professionally, I was basically wiped out.”

He recalled how “my wife and I felt awful when this was going on,” however, every year that's gone by he's been proven more right. “That's basically cemented my place in history.”

Over the years and until this day, people [recognize Moss's critical contributions](#) and leap to his defense when asked.

A most important statement was given to *Antiwar.com* over the weekend from [Diana Zuckerman](#), who worked on the Democratic staff of the VA committee at the time Moss testified, and then later on, went to work for first lady Hillary Clinton. Now the president of the National Research Center for Women & Families, she said this about Moss:

Jim Moss' research was key in understanding what was happening to Gulf War veterans, and with Senator Rockefeller's strong support, we made that clear in our 1994 Senate report. The Clinton White House also wanted to get the science right and get veterans the help they deserved. But, the Pentagon didn't want to believe what had happened and neither did the VA. Perhaps most important, the company that made DEET wanted to make sure that scientific evidence didn't harm their bottom line.

Moss said that after that 1994 report, [there were a number of key studies](#) on the effects of PB interacting with DEET and pesticides, including one in 1996 done with rats, with similar conclusions. “They gave me no credit,” he noted.

He has been following the issues and [writing and formulating new theories in scientific articles](#) based on current research, but not his own. Without the opportunity to obtain grant money to do his own lab work, today he must be content to carve out a living working in someone else's laboratory. He expresses frustration, like many other veterans advocates today, that decades of Gulf War research has yet to translate into targeted treatment for sick soldiers, mostly because the government has resisted coming to any conclusion about *what* is making them sick (and, [as I wrote](#) in my *American Conservative* piece, even with the evidence right in front of them, the government tends to thwart the process).

“What our government has done is set this thing back 20 years,” he said. “If I had gotten credit and been able to continue to work we have been farther along right now.”

He spoke of [his theory](#) that the toxic exposures have caused autoimmunity disorder in veterans. This means the immune system attacks the health body, causing many of the aforementioned conditions. “If I am close to being right, you've got a lot of pain and suffering going on.”



Rolling Thunder as Religious Pilgrimage (Credit: Vlahos)

Just another story – and there are many – of someone trying to do the right thing, and the government, in its infinite struggle to keep The Faith while protecting itself and its corporate consorts from harm, demobilizing him rather completely, so that he must rage and toil at the margins.

The seemingly endless white graves marking the national cemetery include not only those who died *in* war but those who died *from* it. It would be difficult to assess how many men and women expired prematurely from illnesses or disease connected to their service, but people like Moss are trying to reduce that number altogether. Chances are a lot of those guys riding Harleys rumbling down to the National Mall right now personally know sick soldiers. Do they know how difficult it's been to make them well? Do they know that the Pentagon, which is giving these biker-patriots free reign over their parking lots this weekend, has much to do with why it's not happening faster?

On this Memorial Day, maybe we can spend less time genuflecting and a little more reflecting – how our wars make men “heroes” and “warriors,” who suddenly turn to “burdens” and “liabilities” once their service is over. The best way to honor the dead is to make sure they did not die in vain. Let's start by helping truth-tellers like Jim Moss get a pulpit, and not a pink slip.

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